

CONSUMER

You and the U.S. mail

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Stop and think about it! Put a letter in any box, at any house, on any street in any city and a few days later it surfaces at some other box, at some other house, on some other street in some other city far away.

Consider, too, that your letter is one of some 166 billion pieces of mail delivered each year. And that, although the United States has five percent of the world's population, it generates 40 percent of the world's mail.

Of course, things can and do go wrong. Practically anyone can tell you a story about a piece of mail that went awry. But Ann Mc-Kernan Robinson, consumer advocate and vice president of the U.S. Postal Service, thinks that overall the nation's mail carriers do one heck of a job.

Robinson was in Salt Lake City this past week to talk with Salt Lake City postal workers, who recently ranked among the highest in the country in independent surveys that rate perception of service and actual delivery time of mail.

Sacramento and Wichita (Seattle ranked first).

That's good news, says Robinson, but it's still not perfect. And if you have any complaints about the mail, she wants to hear about them. Her office hears from about 100,000 people a year — both requests for information and complaints — and every letter is answered.

The most frequent complaints, she says, have to do with late delivery, followed by misdelivery (you get your neighbor's mail, for example), and third, problems involved with forwarding mail after you move.

You can write to either her or Postmaster General Marvin Runyon, U.S. Postal Headquarters, Washington, DC 20260. Or, you can write to your local postmaster (those letters get forwarded on).

"I'd like to think that we are becoming more customer-friendly," says Robinson. But that doesn't mean there aren't challenges.

In addition to the huge volume of mail the Post Office deals with, there is the fact that the volume

electronics is changing the way information is transferred.

"The world is changing, and we need to change with it," she says.

In the meantime, there are ways consumers can help to improve mail delivery.

The biggest thing consumers do wrong, she says, is improper addressing of mail.

For best results, parcels and letters should be clearly marked with the address, including ZIP code, of both sender and receiver. The writing should be indelible ink or typed on a label and be easily readable at 30 inches (arm length).

For best service, capitalize everything in the address. Leave out all punctuation except the hyphen in the ZIP+4 code (if you have it). Use common abbreviations for streets and roads and the 2-letter state abbreviations. Include RM (room), STE (suite), FLR (floor) or APT (apartment) number on the same line as the street address.

Other ways consumers can help their local mail carriers are by not allowing dogs to run loose

More than 1 way to send a letter

Here's a run-down of common mail services:

Certificate of mailing: Proves that an item was mailed, but it doesn't provide insurance or proof of delivery, and you keep the only record of the mailing.

Certified mail: Gives you a mailing receipt, and a record of delivery is kept at the recipient's post office. You can also get a return receipt to provide you with proof of delivery for an extra dollar. But if you're mailing something valuable, use insured or registered mail.

Express mail: The fastest service provided by the U.S. mail, and it's guaranteed or your money back. Mail will be delivered by noon the next day between major markets and by 3 p.m. to smaller cities in the Express Mail network. There is also an option where you can pick up Express Mail at the post office as early as 10 a.m., and another option that can be mailed between airports for even faster service.

Forwarding mail: When you move, fill out a free change-of-address card. Whenever possible, notify your post office at least one month before your move. First-class mail is forwarded at no charge for one year. Second-class mail, including magazines and newspapers, is forwarded at no charge for 60 days from the effective date of a change-of-address order.

Fourth-class mail or parcel post: Usually the least expensive option, this is for packages weighing one pound or more. It can take up to eight days to be delivered, depending on the distance involved.

Insurance: You can get up to \$600 coverage, but you can only be reimbursed for actual value that you can prove. If you have something more valuable than \$600, use registered mail.

Priority mail: Normally delivered in two days between 51 major cities in the network, and in three days to all other places. However, the time frame is not guaranteed. It costs \$2.90 for up to two pounds.

Registered mail: This is the most secure option. Registered items are placed under tight security and you can insure them for up to \$25,000 if you are mailing within the United States. There's a \$1,000 insurance limit on items to Canada, and a \$32.35 limit on articles to all other foreign countries. Customers must declare full value of the item when it is mailed — even if the value is over \$25,000.

Restricted delivery: This means your letter is delivered only to the addressee or someone authorized to receive the mail for them. You can only get this with registered mail, certified mail, COD mail and mail insured for more than \$50. It costs an additional \$2.50.

Return receipt: This is the sender's proof of delivery, and is a postcard that shows who signed for the item and the date it was delivered. You can get a return receipt only for merchandise, Express Mail, registered mail and certified mail. Cost is \$1. If you decide you need one after the fact, the cost of verifying delivery is \$6.

Special delivery: If your letter arrives at the destination city after your letter carrier has already started the route — or if it arrives on a Sunday or holiday — the letter is still delivered that same day. This service is only offered in larger cities. A better option is probably Express Mail, which gets there overnight and costs almost the same.

Special handling: Items sent Special Handling are the last items put on a truck and the first ones taken off, so they get a little extra attention. But it does not get them delivered more quickly. Nor does it mean special care of fragile items.

Stamps by mail: You can purchase stamps, post cards and stamped envelopes through the mail by using an order form available from your post office or your letter carrier. There is no service charge, and you will receive your order within three business days.

A survey by Price waterhouse, for example, found that 90 percent of overnight first class letters arrived on time in Salt Lake City (compared to a nationwide average of 84 percent). And in a poll conducted by Opinion Research Corporation, 93 percent of Salt Lake area customers rated their overall mail service as "excellent," "very good," or "good."

When those two scores are combined, Salt Lake City is tied for second place with

continues to build; first class mail was up 2 percent last year. There is more competition from other delivery sources;

not allowing dogs to enter and keeping steps cleared of ice and snow in the winter. And, "on a hot day, a glass of lemonade is always welcome."



Keep your eyes open when buying by mail

Ordering merchandise and conducting business through the mail can save time and money, but occasionally problems arise.

Dealing with companies that you know and that have a good reputation is a good idea. (Check the reputation by contacting the Better Business Bureau). Mail order companies are required by law to ship merchandise within certain time frames or to notify

you of a delay and give you the option of canceling your order.

A few companies use the mail to promote scams and frauds (be wary if you get a postcard saying that you have won some great prize).

If you have trouble with a mail order company or suspect that you have been the victim of mail fraud, contact your local postmaster or postal inspector, or write to one of the following:

— Chief Postal Inspector, US Postal Service Rm 3021, 475 L'Enfant Plaza SW, Washington DC 20260-2100, or

— Consumer Advocate, US Postal Service RM 5821, 475 L'Enfant Plaza West SW, Washington DC 20260-2200.

You may report postal crimes such as mail theft, drugs in the mail or mail fraud by calling the Postal Crime Hotline, 1-800-654-8896.

— You can stop the mailing of unsolicited sexually oriented advertisements to you or your minor children by filling out Application for Listing Pursuant to 39 USC 3010 at your local post office. Thirty days after your name has been added to the Postal Service reference list, any mailer who sends you sexually oriented advertisements is subject to legal action.